

Chapter 1

January 1998

Stopping for lunch proved the worst decision of Lance Wolf's life.

El Gran Pez restaurant stood like an island in an ocean of debris, a hint of a bygone fishing industry wafting on the afternoon breeze. Brightly colored cigarette boats and expensive cars stood out among the rust of abandoned conveyances—the Sinaloa drug cartel's arrogance on display.

Wolf, his stepfather Andy, and his mother, Alma, emerged from their truck and stretched after the five-hour drive to Topolobampo, Sinaloa, Mexico. The smell of seawater and fresh asphalt reminded Wolf of the ongoing construction where he lived near Tampa bay.

Just then, three blacked-out Range Rovers raced into the parking lot, pulled up to the entrance, and a security detail leaped out to escort a woman inside. She stopped at the open door scanning the area. She was tall, athletic build, long black hair, and outwardly perfect skin framing dark penetrating eyes. She had the look of a predator.

"Eliana Cortes," Wolf whispered. "Sinaloa Drug Cartel."

"None of our business," Andy said. "We'll just eat and go."

"They've been my business since the end of the Cold War—Dad."

A handsome young man met them just inside the front door.

“Good afternoon, I am Hector Gonzalez. Are you Mr. Wolf?” He said.

“Yes, and these are my parents, Alma and Andrew Anderson.”

“My brother said you would be stopping by on the way home. Please let me show you to your table.”

As they were escorted to their table, Wolf took note of escape routes and choke points as was his customary process. He marveled at the unexpected elegant dining. The booths along the walls included high backs and curtains you could draw for privacy. Muted tones on the walls framed what looked to be original Joaquin Sorolla and Francisco Goya paintings of fishing and life on the water. The room accommodated about three dozen booths and tables. There was a bar, just big enough for the bartender and sommelier. A sign in Spanish read VIP at the far end of the dining area. Two men, undoubtedly from the Cortes security team, guarded the door.

“I apologize for seating you next to the kitchen,” Hector said. “Please accept this gift of wine. I think you will find it pairs well with our fish entrees.”

Wolf leaned across the table and whispered to his stepfather, “Amazing what drug money can buy.”

“Stop, you’ll upset your mother.”

Wolf’s parents ordered the chef’s special, Colorado snapper with a lemon-butter caper sauce. He ordered Goliath grouper, wanting to compare it with the grouper back home in Florida. Wolf attempted to lighten the mood, raising his glass of wine, “To a relaxing vacation.”

His parents raised their glasses and they clinked before drinking.

The waitress appeared and apologized for breaking up the conversation. As she passed the plates of seafood around, the air was filled with aroma's of grilled fish and aromatic spices. They fell silent as they enjoyed the food. Wolf was savoring a bite of grouper when he noticed Hector walking toward the kitchen with a worried look on his face. He was being steered by a large man with a Heckler and Koch MP5 in one hand and the other on his shoulder. A crash of plates and a burst of automatic gunfire sent people screaming and running.

In one fluid motion, Wolf pulled his Browning Hi-Power 9mm pistol from its Safariland pancake holster on his right hip and rushed toward the scene. Wolf glanced behind to see Andy following with his .45 ACP at the ready. The large man who had been steering Hector held his still smoking MP5 submachine gun at the ready as he stood over a lifeless waitress.

“Drop it!” Wolf yelled in Spanish, and when the gunman moved his MP5 in their direction, he did not hesitate. Two hollow-point 9mm rounds slammed into the gunman's chest. As the gunman dropped, a burst of automatic gunfire cracked past Wolf, a round striking Andy in the right arm. Wolf pushed him away as he hollered, “Get Mom! Meet you at the truck!”

Wolf dropped and moved to cover behind a column. The room was chaos, bodies slumped across tables and littered the floor. A security detail rushed out of the VIP room surrounding Eliana Cortes. As they moved her toward the front door, Wolf locked eyes with her for a second before she shouted, “Kill Hector and the Americans!”

Rounds cracked against the column, splintering the wood. The gunman was shooting wildly from the middle of the dining area. Wolf moved out from the left side of the column and

shot three times in rapid succession to put the gunman down. He retrieved the gunman's MP5 and extra magazines. In his peripheral vision, his parents ran toward the kitchen.

Headed for the service door, good.

Wolf cleared the VIP room and worked his way to the front door where he saw a gunman in the shadows his weapon pointed outside. Wolf put two rounds into his upper back. He toppled partly out the door, causing more screams from those outside. Wolf kicked away his weapon and took in the scene. Wounded staff and diners littered the parking lot. Tires screeched as cars speed away.

Wolf performed a combat reload, inserting a fresh magazine in the MP5 and put the partially used one in his back pocket. He slapped the charging handle to ready the weapon and stopped cold.

It was hard to hear over the noise, his mother singing.

Oh, Mom, no!

Rushing back into the restaurant, Wolf heard his mother finish her death song and scream a war cry. Andy's .45 barked twice. Seconds later more gun shots followed by the sound of an MP5 on full auto erupted from the kitchen area. Wolf blasted through the waiter's door, his senses registering the odd mix of burning seafood and gunpowder. To his left he saw two dead gunmen. To his right a gunman standing over bodies turned to shoot. Wolf killed him with a three-round burst. Wolf shot him twice more as he stepped over the body to reach the bodies. There, halfway out of the service door, he found Andy shielding his mother and another woman. He checked

Andy for a pulse, nothing. A concentrated circle of wounds in his back had sealed his fate. Gently pulling him off his mother, he found her pulse weak but steady. As he tended to her wounds the rising harshness of sirens brought hope.

A few minutes later, the place was swarming with law enforcement and EMS. Wolf was standing, MP5 still in his hand, watching EMTs load his mother onto a stretcher, when a police officer came into his sight with his pistol drawn and ordered him to the ground. Wolf spoke calmly in Spanish as he laid down and pushed the MP5 away. "I am her son, not cartel. I need to go with my mother."

A second officer grabbed his arms and handcuffed them behind his back.

"I'm her son! Let me go!" Wolf said.

Face down and handcuffed on the asphalt, he watched the ambulance drive out of sight.

Wolf rolled over and sat up. "I know who you are, Eliana."

Chapter 2

The thirty-minute drive in the back of the police car gave Wolf time to think. Wolf was nine when his stepfather Andy had come into their lives. He had been taught to push emotion aside and process the problem in front of him. It wasn't working, this was different. His thoughts flashing back and forth between taking care of his wounded mother and revenge, Wolf struggled to gain control of himself. In a moment of calmness, it struck him. The juxtaposition of the cartel's billions in profits each year and the hard life of the residents. The view before him was long past quaint. It was worn out.

Wolf sat at a table in the windowless cinder-block room under a single shop light. The police headquarters in Los Mochis, Mexico, looked new.

Someone got a deal on prison gray paint.

As he was brought to the interview room, Wolf had seen enough of the facility and its people to understand their struggle to maintain law and order in a State controlled by the Sinaloa Cartel. The floor, walls and furniture were all gray, except for the occasional splash of color from a family picture or soccer poster. Tired best described the mood and activity level of the officers and administrators.

A younger fit looking man with a thick black mustache and eyebrows to match entered the room rolling in TV and a VCR. His well tailored blue suit and movement set him apart from the others. He set a cassette recorder on the table and sat down across from Wolf. They stared at one another for a moment, then the officer said, "I'm Lieutenant Victor Cardenas. I need your statement." Without waiting for an answer, he turned on the recorder. "Mr. Wolf, tell us what happened at El Gran Pez."

Wolf knew how these things went. He had seen and completed his fair share of interrogations. Wolf expected a multi-hour visit, given the carnage at the restaurant, but hoped the lieutenant would quickly get to the point .

"How long are we going to be? I need to get to the hospital," Wolf snapped, pulling hard against the handcuff. The knot in his stomach growing larger with concern for his mother.

"I will make this as quick as possible."

Wolf told his version of events at El Gran Pez and noticed Cardenas was not taking notes.

Why am I wasting my time? They can't do anything against the cartel.

He noticed Cardenas stiffen at the mention of Eliana Cortes and her security detail. Wolf also thought it odd Cardenas did not ask him where he got the weapons he was carrying when arrested. The serial number on his Browning High Power would lead nowhere, unlike Andy's 45.

Cardenas thanked Wolf for his story, "Your ability to remember details is impressive."

If you only knew Wolf thought as the memory played in his mind's eye.

The Army had sent him for training at the CIA Camp Perry facility. Their experts had improved his photographic memory to near perfect. Later the Intelligence Support Activity Commander told Wolf. “You have the perfect combination of photographic memory, toughness and ability to manage fear. I have you flagged you for priority solo missions.”

The noise of Cardenas’ sliding a video into the VCR broke Wolf from the memory. The playback confirmed Wolf’s account. Cardenas replaced the video with another. He fast-forwarded the video for a few seconds and then hit pause. The view this time from the kitchen.

“Your parents?”

Wolf nodded and stared, amazed at how Andy worked to get what looked to be Hector and his wife to safety. He shook his head as Andy ignored his own safety to get the service door open. Watching Andy get hit and fall backward was harder than he expected. Wolf forced himself not to show emotion in front of Cardenas as his mother appeared, leaning over Andy. The audio was barely discernable. His mother’s voice getting louder and louder.

“What is she saying?” Cardenas said as he stopped the playback.

“She’s singing her death song.”

Wolf had only heard his mother sing her song once in his life, and he remembered the way his mother’s voice carried on the wind.

Cardenas raised an eyebrow. “I was raised in the US, and I have never heard of this before.”

“They don’t teach Crow Indian culture in American schools. We sing it before battle when we believe it’s our time to die.”

“You were singing when I found you.”

Wolf stared at his mother’s image and nodded.

Cardenas restarted the video. Wolf’s mother stood, screamed a war cry, and fired at unseen targets. She was helping another woman when she was struck in the back as she headed for the door. Wolf’s heart swelled in admiration and sadness as a wounded Andy rose to fling himself over his mother before a gunman appeared and fired until his MP5 was empty. Then Wolf entered the video and killed the gunman, before blocking the waiter’s door, and carrying his mother out.

“Azul’s shooting of the waitress was unmistakably accidental. You and your parents turned an accident into a massacre,” Cardenas said, looking directly at Wolf.

“You know the guy that started the gunfight?” Wolf said, dismissing Cardenas statement about their part in the fight.

“Yes, a mean one from Eliana’s security detail. You could have run away like the rest.”

“Would you? We had no choice, people were dying.”

Cardenas was silent for a moment, then he pushed Wolf’s wallet and cell phone across the table.

Wolf stood, holding his handcuffed wrist out. Barely able to control his frustration he said, “Lieutenant, is there any hope you can bring these killers to justice?”

Cardenas shook his head as he stood. “I am sorry, Mr. Wolf, it is unlikely. But you are free to go for now. We will attend to the matter of your possessing illegal firearms later. Your mother is at Medical Center hospital. I pray for her speedy recovery.”

Chapter 3

Eliana Cortes sat across from her older brother, Alejandro, and gritted her teeth. He was on the phone with a source at the police department. She thought back to their early years. He had always made sure she knew her place in the organization. She would never be in charge. Unfortunately, Alejandro was not the inspirational leader his father had been. His short stature came from their mother's side of the family. His attempt at looking the part of a concerned citizen and business owner did not match with his slicked back black hair, gold chains, and bland facial expression. Most people found his lack of emotion disturbing. If asked, Alejandro would say their father, Romulo, had beaten it out of him.

The Cortes family roots as simple farmers belied their current position. The switch from Mexican staples to marijuana had brought them into an alliance with Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo, commonly referred to by his alias El Padrino, in the early eighties. Since then they had continued to expand to become the leading supplier in Sinaloa. The family had stayed on the production side of the business until Romulo gave the Federal Police what they needed to capture and imprison El Padrino. After the alliance of Felix's plaza's fell apart, Romulo aligned himself with El Chapo and his Sinaloa cartel. The pivot from supplier to head of west coast operations and distribution for the Sinaloa cartel was Alejandro's idea. He accelerated the change after Romulo's passing in December 1990. Their base of operation continued to be the family

ranch outside of Los Mochis, which Eliana thought had lost its old world charm and begun to take on the air of a military command center.

Her brother ended the call and stared at her, not speaking or moving. Eliana went on offense. “Alejandro, we are in this situation because Hector was stealing cocaine from our shipments.”

“Sister, I am confused. What did Hector do to start a war in his restaurant?”

“Well, it wasn’t Hector, it was an American.”

“I send you to get our cocaine back and Azul kills a waitress. Then the American kills Azul and your people shoot everyone in the restaurant? What the hell is that? Don’t speak. I’ll tell you—you forgot to use your brains.”

“But I was smart, I did not order any shooting.”

“You were smart?” he scoffed. “Your smart has elevated our status in the news as killers of innocent Mexicans and Americans. The Americans will push our government to take action.”

Eliana sat silently. There would never be a positive spin on the lost cocaine, or the political capital they would spend fixing her mess. In all of her 34 years, Alejandro had never respected her, and he wouldn’t start now. Eight years ago, when her father was still alive, he’d given her a mission—to smuggle cocaine into California. She had devised the plan to use fishing boats. It was her plan to create the El Gran Pez as a trans-shipment facility. It was successful as no one batted an eye at the old fishing village and restaurant. Since then Eliana had worked hard

to prove herself. Using El Chapo as her guide, she had transformed from Romulo's little girl to a feared member of the cartel, prone to violence first.

“Tell me about the Americans.”

“We don't know who, but they may have been ex-military or police. Their training was not enough for my men.”

Alejandro turned and stared out the bay window at the garden. “Not enough? Are you stupid? The Americans killed seven of your men. Work with Joaquin to find out everything on them. Tell our friend at the newspaper Hector was working for the Tijuana Cartel and he hired the Americans. The Americans started the shooting and you just escaped with your life. You know the rest. Also, check with our source in the police department for witnesses.

“Yes, Alejandro.”

“Eliana, one more thing, how are you going to pay me back for the lost cocaine and fixing this problem?”

Eliana had been waiting for the question, but her body still telegraphed her fear. Her brother was ruthless. She'd seen what he did to men who caused problems, and who knew what he would do to his own flesh and blood. “What do you want, Alejandro? I can give you a larger percentage of my take.”

With a wave of his hand, he cut her off. “Taking money from you is not a lesson. I want you to learn violence is not always the best option. Come with me into the courtyard.”

Eliana stiffened. What is he up to?

She followed him into the courtyard. Large palm trees and colorful flowers lined the perimeter. In the center was a large fountain. Eliana's blood ran cold at the sight of two bodyguards and Tomas, the ranch blacksmith. He wouldn't look at her.

"You know, Tomas. He is a master at this kind of thing," Alejandro said with a smirk.

Tomas was waving the fire from a propane torch back and forth across a red hot plate. The plate appeared to have writing on it. Eliana's heart raced. Before she could say anything, the two bodyguards grabbed her and held her arm down on the edge of the fountain. She tried to escape their grasp, but it was useless. She glared at Alejandro with rage.

Alejandro nodded to Tomas. He pressed the red-hot brand onto her forearm, the flesh sizzling under the intense heat. Hot tears burned her eyes, and she grunted but did not cry out as he lifted the brand from her arm. She stared at the angry red wound.

You bastard, it will be my turn one day.

Eliana snapped out of her thoughts. "LET GO OF ME!" she said.

A nod from Alejandro and the bodyguards stepped back. She plunged her arm into the fountain. The pain was severe, and she willed herself not to faint. Still glaring at Alejandro, she brought her arm out. The flesh on her forearm an angry red. The raised welt said *pensar*, "THINK."

Alejandro grabbed Eliana by the wrist and held her arm. “Think, I will not tell you again.”

She nodded and snatched her arm away before reaching to her ankle holster. “Tomas, this is for you.”

The guards jumped too late to intervene. The report from her Walther PPK brought additional security, only to be waved off by Alejandro. Eliana stood over Tomas, staring into his eyes as they slowly glazed over, the wound to his neck spurting blood through his fingers. A minute later he was dead.

Eliana glared at her brother and walked out.